Egyptian and Syrian SufiS Viewing Ottoman Turkish Sufism: Similarities, Differences, and Interactions

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In August 1516 the Ottoman Sultan Selim I defeated the Mamluks on the plain of Marj Dabiq, near Aleppo, and quickly conquered Syria. In January of the next year, the Ottomans conquered Egypt, thus completing the destruction of the Mamluk Sultanate, and annexed Egypt and Syria as provinces. Both empires were Sunni, and were ruled by Turkish-speaking sultans, who commanded mostly Turkish-speaking troops. Despite these and other similarities, there were fundamental differences between the two empires. This paper focuses on the religious aspects, Sufism in particular.

Both the Mamluks and the Ottomans were committed to live by the Shariʿa, and developed systems of religious colleges, madrasas, aimed primarily at training ulema. Egypt and Syria had the oldest and most prestigious institutes of higher learning, principally in Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo. The Ottoman system was more centralized and hierarchical than anything known in Islam until then, and was geared for preparing students to serve as madrasa professors, judges, and jurisconsults. Despite the differences between the Mamluks and the Ottomans in the religious structure, such as the monopoly of the Hanafi madhhab in the Ottoman judicial system, as compared to the coexistence of the four Sunni legal schools under the Mamluks, educational methods and approaches were similar. The religious subjects taught in madrasas in both empires were similar.

Ahmad b. Mustafa, known as Taşköprüzade (d. 968/1561) wrote a pioneering biographical dictionary of Ottoman ulema and Sufis in grammatically correct Arabic. From his autobiography that concludes his book, one learns about his Muslim education and career as a scholar.1 Although the Ottoman core provinces were Turkish speaking, the linguistic requirement of an Ottoman 'alim was the knowledge of Arabic in order to be able to read the religious and legal sources.

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Mamluk versus Ottoman Sufism

In both empires, ulema and rulers usually regarded Sufism as legitimate, and even as a complement to Muslim scholarly knowledge (ʾilm) and experience. In its struggle for legitimacy, the movement had gone a long way. In spite of lingering opposition, Sufism can be seen as a success story. Many ulema were tolerant towards Sufis, if they abided by the Shariʿa law, and their doctrines were not too far from the theological mainstream. Moreover, many ulema were themselves initiated into orthodox Sufi orders. Yet, while there was general understanding about what was acceptable to the Shariʿa, there were disagreements about aspects of mysticism, because it had never been defined as clearly as the law, and was open to many debates and interpretations. The level of tolerance for mystical ideas varied among the ulema and the Sufis themselves, and also between Arab and Turkish Islam.

Generally, in the period under discussion (from the 10th/16th through the 12th/18th centuries), the separation between ulema and Sufis was sharper among the Ottomans than it was in the Arab lands. This is evident even from the way the biographical dictionaries are organized in both cultures. In Taşköprüzade's Shaqa‘iq and its zeyller, the Turkish supplements that continue it into the next centuries, the biographies are organized under the sultans' reigns, first listing the high-ranking ulema (mollas), and, in the next section, the Sufi shaykhs.2 In the biographical dictionaries written in the Arab provinces, however, during the Ottoman period, no such separation was used; ulema and Sufis are arranged alphabetically and chronologically. Since there are no special sections for Sufis, and almost every ʿalim had Sufi affiliations, it is often hard to tell whether the person is a Sufi or an ʿalim. One has to look at his career rather than at Sufi links.

There were cases of Ottoman ulema who were employed as qadis, madrasa professors, or administrators at a religious institution; at some point they decided to forsake their careers to join the Sufis, sometimes

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2 See especially the great centennial collections of Damascus and others in Aleppo and Cairo. Najm al-Din al-Ghazzi (d. 1061/1651) for the 10th/16th and the first third of the 11th/17th century, Muhammad al-Amin al-Muhibbi (d. 1111/1699) for the 11th/17th century, and Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi (d. 1206/1791 or 1792) for the 12th/18th century. For bibliographic information, see Michael Winter, “Historiography in Arabic during the Ottoman period”, in Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period, ed. Roger Allen and D.S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 171–90.